Identity and Exclusion: two case studies concerning adults' motivations, dispositions and identities on adult numeracy courses

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Abstract

This article draws on research conducted in 2002-2003 into adults studying numeracy in two colleges of further education. It uses case studies of two white, middle-aged, working-class women designated to be working at a relatively low level of mathematics (Entry Level), and argues that a study of the micro world will often relate to, and help us understand, the macro world. The narratives explore the women's motivations for attending numeracy courses, and suggest that relatively short, part-time courses have the potential to transform learners' identities, their aspirations and their dispositions towards learning. The article explores the relationship between agency and wider structures (such as social class and gender) which, are argued, constrain the learners options and opportunities. However, the article also draws on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and suggests that it is dynamic and can be modified to a certain extent. The article also raises questions about a perceived shift in the discourses found in government adult basic skills policies of moving away from an entitlement of lifelong learning towards a concentration on more narrowly defined skills at higher levels for employability.

Key words: Skills for Life learners, lifelong learning, widening access, identities, habitus, working-class, gender, numeracy, further education

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Introduction

> *I've always spent years thinking I'm more than what I am. I think it's a case of confidence. Proving to yourself that you are worth something.*
>
> *In yourself I think you come to the point where you lose yourself or start fighting back and changing.*

This paper draws on a research study into adults' relations with numeracy in two colleges of further education (FE) in England. It uses case studies of two women learners designated to be working at a relatively low level of mathematics (Entry Level), and the extracts above come from each of them. Although I am not looking to use their narratives to provide a formal typology, they allow me to exemplify more general themes from the main study such as learners' experiences at school, their motivations for returning to, and continuing to attend, numeracy classes, the ways in which relatively short, part-time, courses have the potential to transform learners' identities, their dispositions towards learning and their future aspirations. The biographical approach draws on perspectives from some of the theories used in the research, and enables me to explore such concepts as habitus, capital and the relationship between structure and agency.

Background and methodology

The research study on which this paper is based is called *Making numeracy teaching meaningful to adult learners,* and was commissioned by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC). The fieldwork took

place over a 12-month period between 2002 and 2003, and altogether the research team observed and interviewed 70 adult numeracy learners who were working between Entry Level 2 to Level 2 (equivalent to the top three grades at GCSE) in three FE colleges. However, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on two learners in two different colleges, who were working at Entry Levels 2 and 3 [1]. The information comes from semi-participant observations, informal conversations both inside and outside the classroom (e.g., coffee times), three semi-structured interviews with each student, and from discussions and session notes from the learners' class teachers who were also researchers on the project [2]. To preserve their anonymity, I have removed any references to the learners' individual colleges and the names of their teachers.

The two women attended stand-alone numeracy classes during the daytime on a voluntary basis. The courses ran for about two and a half hours each week, which equates to about 75 hours over the year. Castle Mount College is in a commercial, ethically diverse, city about 30 miles from London, and Priory View College is in a rural county town in the west of England. The average size of the class at Castle Mount was 8; the age range 17-65; the gender balance 80% female, 20% male; and there was a range of ethnicities with about half the class being White British. At Priory View the average class size was 5; the age range 18-52; the gender balance was roughly equal; and the learners were almost exclusively White British. Some of these learners in this class also had additional needs due to specific learning difficulties, mental health problems and physical or mental disabilities. Many learners told me they were receiving financial state benefits of one kind or another, and although I have no formal way of categorising their social class, I am presuming the vast majority to be working-class. Running the classes in the daytime meant that none of the learners were in full-time employment, although one or two at Castle Mount worked on a part-time basis.

Prompted, initially, by a government response to low levels of literacy and numeracy in the British adult population, the early years of the century have seen a radical transformation in adult education in England with an emphasis on national basic skills provision. *Skills for Life* (2001, 2003a, 2003b) represents the first large-scale intervention

into the area of adult basic skills since the 1970s. Numeracy is recognised as a particularly important domain in the strategy: the survey of need (DfES, 2003c) revealed that amongst participants in the survey 47 per cent of respondents were classified at Entry Level 3 or below in the numeracy assessment, which suggested that 15 million adults in England have lower level numeracy skills (DfES 2003c, p 19).

Appleby and Bathmaker (2006) contend that the *Skills for Life* strategy began by embracing two perceptible discourses: the first was rooted in the notion of lifelong learning connected to learning entitlement in the interests of social inclusion and justice; whilst the second was linked to the acquisition of individual skills in the knowledge economy for the interests of higher levels of economic prosperity. There is an obvious tension here, and Appleby and Bathmaker argue that the original aims of the strategy have begun to change, with a gradual but discernible shift in policy towards privileging skills acquisition for national economic performance, at the expense of an entitlement to lifelong learning. A new emphasis has emerged, with associated funding, on providing skills for employment, particularly for young people. This means that adults with the greatest needs are not always targeted because they are less likely to achieve national qualifications relatively quickly. Writing in the *Guardian,* the minister for higher and further education, Bill Rammell (2005), argues that the first priority for FE should be for employability, and that this is also the most effective way to achieve social justice and tackle poverty. However, as we shall see, not all learners who take numeracy courses are seeking employment, and this paper argues that the government fails to recognise the great variety of motives that adults to join basic skills classes. Coffield (2000) contends that many people returning to formal education for the first time have had a history of negative experience of schooling, and their goal is more likely to be to do with participation rather than getting a qualification. Recent research by Swain et al (2005) suggests that the main reasons people attend numeracy classes are for their personal fulfilment, to support their children at school and to prove they can succeed in a subject which they see as being a signifier of intelligence.

Theoretical approach

At the heart of this paper are learners' identities- how they view themselves and who they think they are. Identity is not viewed as an innate and unitary quality that people possess, but rather as something people do and are done by; in other words, as Mendick (2005) argues, it should be seen as a verb rather than a noun. A key point to make is that identities are unfinished and in process; as Hall (1992) says, identity belongs as much to the future as to the past for it is a matter of 'becoming' as much as 'being'. Identity is also multiple and we should therefore talk about identities which are socially constructed, negotiated and performed.

In order to understand more fully how people develop their dispositions towards learning in general, and mathematics in particular, the paper also draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1979). In relation to the study, individuals – particularly those who have had had a poor experience of schooling - may come to believe that they are educational failures, including being no good at mathematics. Sennett (2006) points out how deeply a knowledge system can affect an individual, and he also talks about 'the spectre of uselessness', which these two women may sometimes have felt. These feelings are subconsciously internalised and reinforced until they become their established way of being and are expressed through interactions with others. It is also likely that if nearly all their friends and family left school at 16 and went to work rather than pursue higher qualifications, this will shape their own experiences and their aspirations. However, this is not to say that individuals have no agency and that their lives are largely determined. Indeed, as we shall see below, some adults do appear to be able to change their attitudes and dispositions towards mathematics (and learning in general), although the design of the research made it impossible to say how enduring these are. We shall also see that one of the two learners began to alter her aspirations as her sense of achievement and level of self-esteem grew. The paper builds on work by Bartlett and Holland (2002), Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) and Rowsell (2003) who argue that the concept of habitus is dynamic and can underplay the possibility of change. The narratives in this paper suggest that, within particular

contexts and circumstances, individuals are able to change their views and understanding of themselves, and that this can also lead to a shift, or modification, of habitus.

The learners are viewed as active, 'skilled and knowledgeable agents' (Giddens, 1984), capable of articulating their experiences and perceptions and acting with intent; they are not simply the passive subjects, or 'cultural dupes' of external structural forces. However, I am also aware that people are still living within a context of wider structural relations such as social class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, dis/ability and age, and are also influenced by cultural differences of family, school, peer group and media. Individuals, therefore, only act so far as their structural position and cultural influences allow them to. There are also structures which have the potential to act as constraints and create barriers to learning: these include lack of power and comparative low levels of economic and socio-cultural resources such as money, educational qualifications and understandings of the educational system. In Bourdieuian terms, the learners have low economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Indeed, the ongoing struggle to acquire various forms of capital is of the most significant ways that habitus develops (Connolly, 1998). The two women in this paper were provided with a series of options and opportunities that have had a profound influence on their dispositions to learning and their life chances. The rest of the paper concerns the lives of these two learners and constitutes the main body of this paper.

The case studies: Trudy and Monica

The two women lead different lives, have different motivations and aspirations, and have different levels of mathematical skills and understandings; what they have in common is that both were middle-aged, and they joined a numeracy class in a college of further education and obviously got enough out of it to make them want to keep coming back for more. I have also categorised each woman as 'working-class', and they came from relatively deprived backgrounds. Although Payne et al (1996) point out that deprivation

cannot always be directly equated with class position, both women were unemployed, had low levels of income, and experienced relative deprivation in the sense that they both had a limited access to a range of resources in relation to the society to which they belonged (Townsend, 1987).

At the time of the research, Trudy was in her early fifties. She first came to Priory View for a literacy course, joined the numeracy group in November 2002, and was assessed as working at Entry Level 2. She was living alone and receiving Income Support and a Disability Allowance. In class, she found a lot of learning difficult as she said she had a problem memorising and retaining facts; for instance, she told me that the 5 times table was the only one she could remember. However, she said she was keen to understand mathematical concepts and processes and did not want to be shown 'tricks':

> *I know how to do things but each time I want to do something there's something in my brain* […] *It's like blindness. It's my mind, my brain, it's like a person's blind, they can't see. My mind is blocking the... it's blocking it.*

The second learner, Monica, was around 40 years old. She joined the numeracy class at Castle Mount in September 2002 and was assessed at working in the middle of the Entry Level 2 spectrum. She had also studied IT and literacy at the college. She was a single parent had done various low level menial jobs whilst being a housewife and mother to her teenage son. Her teacher said that Monica found it difficult to follow algorithms such as long division and to learn her multiplication tables. However, although she often fell back on her own tried and trusted methods of calculation, she was also prepared to listen and learn.

> [It's] *What you've relied on for years ... so you stick to that because you know that gives you a hundred per cent answer.*

Early life and schooling

Trudy was brought up on a small farm and left school at 15 without any academic qualifications. She cannot remember learning any mathematics at school at all, and on leaving had a series of low-skilled factory jobs. Trudy was married but her husband left her in the early 1970s; her daughter was taken into care at an unspecified time and Trudy had not seen her as an adult for a number of years. She has a destructive relationship with her mother who seemed to be embarrassed about what she saw as Trudy's inadequacies. Trudy frequently told her teacher and myself that her mother continually put her down, and that this sometimes happened in public. Her mother regularly questioned why Trudy bothered to go to college at all as she would not be able to learn anything. Trudy was always keen to explain to me that, as a child, she was brain damaged when her father banged her head against a wall, and she thought this to be the cause of her learning difficulties.

Monica also had a difficult upbringing. She mentioned, when she was at primary school, how she felt in the shadow of her brother who was much better than her at both English and mathematics, and she was frequently teased by him. She draws on a patriarchal discourse when she told me that the women in her family were brought up to fulfil traditional women's roles:

> *I was brought up in my family that girls weren't important for education. Boys that grew up.... the old fashioned thing of men out at work and women just bred. So I suppose I got married young and did the woman thing, rather than seeking education.*

She went to local junior and secondary schools and left at 15 years of age without any qualifications. Although she enjoyed some of school, and remembers doing quite well at mathematics, she said she was put in the lower ability sets. Her perception was that the school pathologised the people in these sets and effectively wrote them off:

> *It's the basic kind of thing they do in schools, where if you are in a lower class they think you haven't got the intelligence for any subject. So if you were put in a lower class because your English was not very good, then you were categorised as being thick.*

Motivations for returning to learning and continuing to attend

Like many adult learners, Trudy suffered considerable anxiety when she first came back into the classroom:

> *People like me used to be scared, terrified to come into an English class, a maths class, or anywhere. You'd be scared stiff and terrified of people putting you down.*

Trudy said that her long-term goal was to pass an exam to prove to her mother that she could do mathematics.

> [I want] *to show my mum I have got a brain and I can think of doing something and to say to my mum I can do it and not her putting me down a lot.*

Even then, Trudy was not sure that her mother would accept this as a validation of her ability. She also wanted to see if she had the capability to attain a qualification in mathematics for herself, and she referred to this on a few occasions as 'taking a chance'.

> *Why I want to study maths is to find out if I can ... in a way to show myself like I can do maths and be sure of sums and things like that.* […] *I'm trying to prove in my own mind something I never have a chance in my life to do. And I want to try my best and try and make my mind think.*

Proving that she could succeed in a high-status subject was her continuing motivation to attend the class, although at her review with her teacher in March 2004 she said that she

had not had the chance to prove to herself that she could do mathematics because she had not had an opportunity to use it, for example at work. Providing learners with a second chance is a common theme running through post compulsory educational, and was a common one amongst other learners in the larger study. For working-class women like Trudy and Monica, the need to prove oneself is particularly poignant for they are, firstly, likely to see their working-class identities as being positioned outside the academic domain, and secondly, there is also is an inherited legacy of working-class women's presumed unworthiness (Burke, 2002).

Monica spent her time bringing up her son and doing a series of dead-end jobs, but showed agency when she realised that she had to do something to break out of the rut she felt herself in. A key moment seems to have been when her husband left her.

> *You do get fed up with your life to a certain extent. But I think it's usually a catalyst that makes you stop and think of your life change […] I think you have to reach a point where enough's enough; I'm going to do something.*

However, the decision to further her education and return to the classroom was a difficult and brave one. Like many learners, Monica provides an insight into the fears and anxieties that are often part of the return to learning, particularly for adults who have had a poor experience of learning mathematics at school and have been out of formal education for some time. Like Trudy, it took Monica a lot of courage to even get through the door:

> *I'd convinced myself that I'd got to do something. It was a matter of like, things happening, I'd have to go into detail and you'd think I'm weird in the head, but ... the first day I was at the college I stood there. And I thought - you are doing this girl. You are going to go through that door. And part of you is like - no....And how many years...? […] I started to count.... over twenty odd years. And after all them years of never being in education and that apart from being in school, and you*

> *stand there and think - am I kidding myself? […] So you've got that first step which is pushing yourself through that door. And you are going in a room with total strangers and you don't know if you are going to make a complete idiot of yourself*

The quotation above suggests that the first contact with the college, and then the teacher, is crucial, and the process of introduction should be made as welcoming and easy as possible. Although Monica had been in the class for two years, and had made good progress, the feeling of inadequacy still remained underneath the surface:

> *I think you find more in yourself and you realise you are not this waste of space, or useless, or whatever, that there is something there, you don't put yourself down as much. But there's still that little frightened bit inside you thinking - are you pushing yourself too much?*

Like Trudy, a powerful motivation for Monica was that she wanted to prove to herself that she has the ability to study mathematics and succeed.

> *I want to see how far my brain will go.*

Success gave her a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of self-worth.

> *I've always spent years thinking I'm more than what I am. I think it's a case of confidence. Proving to yourself that you are worth something.*

Once again, it seems likely that these feelings stem from what Burke (2002) calls the patriarchal discourse of the 'inferior working-class women', which had become part of her habitus. Now she had the chance to try and better herself and fulfil her potential. She was happy to see how far she can go with (formal) maths/numeracy, possibly up to GCSE, and with her literacy classes she had begun to carve out her own learning career (see Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Crossan et al., 2003). She also thought that a higher

qualification might lead to a better job (in the sense of being more fulfilling and better paid). Although there is little evidence that qualifications at this level have serious currency in the labour market, Monica told me how proud she was to have achieved her pass in her Entry Level 3 test in 2003, and it clearly meant a lot to her. Being a student gave her the chance of becoming a successful student; the resulting qualification and certificate were a visible demonstration of her ability, and we can speculate that this can lead to an inner confidence and change the way she viewed herself.

> *It's something people can't take away from you.*

In common with many learners in the wider study, she also thought that she was setting a good example to her son.

> *I want him to see that his mum can do it, so whatever happens he can do it. It's encouraging for the children. I think it's good to do that.*

Changing identities

Trudy felt that studying was a big part of her life and, like Monica, had begun to plot out a learning career on a journey of self-discovery. Adopting and performing the role of the student had gradually become part of her habitus:

> *I see myself as a person to learn.*

Indeed this need to prove something had recently turned into an obsessive quest for knowledge. According to her teacher, Trudy spend more and more time in college - even staying on into the evening - looking things up on the internet and using sites such as *FunBrain* to practise her skills. She printed, or photocopied, large amounts of material, continuously asked for more work, and spent money buying books. She was also known to travel by bus to other libraries in different towns to get books.

Although towards the end of the course she still felt inhibited and dominated by her mother, she told me that she believed that she has gained a limited amount of confidence from studying. However, in some ways, her journey was full of uncertainties:

> *Finding myself, what I can do that I've never done before*

She felt more independent and was able to stand up for herself, although she could still feel uncomfortable mixing in a group. Returning to the classroom took a lot of courage and she felt overcoming this fear had helped her to believe in herself again. We can only speculate what caused her to lose her confidence in the first place, but it seems likely that the break up of her marriage, and the continual put downs from her mother had taken their toll. Although the fear was still there, it was not so fierce. She compared facing up to one's fears to overcoming a fear of heights, opening up and releasing the potential to achieve more:

> *And if you've overcome that fear you can do more which you never thought you could do.*

It seemed that Trudy's whole identity was dominated by the powerful presence of her mother, who seemed to find fault with almost everything Trudy did.

> *When I'm round on my own, doing something around the town, or thinking to go out somewhere, I've got a feeling she's still with me* […] *She still doesn't think I've got the brain, or the mind, to do it.*

It may be that Trudy wanted to prove that she could achieve something in mathematics more for her mother than for herself. She certainly appeared to feel her mother's presence.

> *I've proved to myself a lot, but I still can't take it in. Getting there slowly, but its hard for me to take it all in, because it still nags in my head, what my mum says.*

> *People say I can do a lot of things and understand things, but it's saying them and doing them is two different things.*

Monica told me that she saw herself changing as a person. She saw learning as a journey, or in her word, a road of self-discovery leading to feelings of greater self-worth (Crossan et al., 2003).

> *You're alive, you're finding out who you are, maybe who I am […] It might not just be just this 'cos things change in your life as you get older and certain things happen but doing this has helped to make me feel more like I'm worth it.*

She was proud of her identity as a student, and she felt that her qualification (Entry Level 3 at the time she spoke to me about this) had given her more confidence, a higher status, and helped her overcome her inferiority complex.

> *Your attitude changes towards people as well, because as you educate yourself, or do something that builds confidence, you now don't allow anybody to treat you with disrespect. I mean, beforehand, because you think you are not good enough you would let somebody talk down to you. Now I would say – 'Excuse me, what do you mean by that?' Rather than walk away and feel hurt by whatever they said. And I think that is the difference.*

Studying and achieving has also given her a higher self-esteem, a belief in herself. She is proud for making herself attend the classes when she could easily have walked away, and this again resonates with working-class women's feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy.

> *I think going to college is one of the steps to prove to yourself that you are not stupid, not thick. Whether you pass or fail the most brave thing is you've had a go.*

As I've mentioned earlier, a key moment in Monica's life was when her husband left her, which gave her the incentive to return to education and make something of herself. Throughout her interviews, her accounts displayed an emphasis on individual agency that allowed her to recognise and transform structural power relations. However, it is also possible to see that these decisions are never simply the products of rationally determined choice; they are linked to other changes in people's personal identities and are inextricably linked to other life experiences which can act as critical turning points. I asked her what she thought she might be doing now if her husband had not have left?

> *Doing the right thing, as they say. Good wife, put up and shut up. Whereas now I look back and I think, I can see their relationship. And he's just swapped one thing for another, and not moved on. Whereas I can see what I've done in the last three years, compared to what he's got now, and he hasn't moved or improved or […] And you can see sometimes the regret is in his face, and you think - don't even go there. The change. Even if he turned around tomorrow and said he wanted to come back, I couldn't. You've changed that person. I think you've grown, the longer you are away from somebody. […] Sometimes I feel, and it's horrible to think it, but I'm not what he would need anymore. Does that sound awful to say? ... you could crush him. In the way that I always was too strong in my ways, but wouldn't let the real person out. But now I'm out I refuse to go back to that put up and shut up … And I'm loving it and the longer you go...You are learning to love yourself, because I think nobody can like you until you start liking who you are.*

It seems that studying has transformed her; altering her perceptions and aspirations and giving her feelings of greater power and autonomy. Monica draws on an Enlightenment discourse of 'improvement' and 'progress', and told me that:

> *You are doing it for yourself. What I'm doing is to improve me, to find me*

Earlier on in this section Trudy talked about 'finding myself' and here, above, Monica says she wants to 'find [a] me'. Both these statements assume an essential, autonomous self with untapped potential and, although the women's narratives also frequently talk of 'change' and 'changing', Burke (2002) has pointed out the tension between the making of self as fixed and the making of self as becoming or identity in progress.

Progress made and future aspirations

Trudy gained an Entry Level 2 certificate in March 2004. Her teacher thought that this represented a great achievement, and it seems likely, at the very least, that studying helped Trudy to *sustain* her levels of numeracy and literacy, as well as, possibly, maintaining or improving her general psychological well being (Schuller et al., 2002). Trudy told me that she intended to come back to the class in September, and that she would not give up [4].

Monica took an AQA Entry Level 3 Accreditation in June 2003 and a Level 1 National Test in May 2004, both of which she passed. In the following September she decided to enrol again in order to work towards a Level 2 National Test which she hoped would, possibly, lead to a GCSE.

Structure and agency

Like all of us, Trudy and Monica do not live in circumstances of her choosing (Marx, 1963; Giddens, 1984). They are both constrained by the resources they are able to draw on, and the power relations that help create the subordinate position of the poor, working-class female student. There are limitations not only on *who* they can be but also on *how* they can be (Skeggs, 1997). Although Trudy has agency, and had made the decision to return to learning, she has often lacked any power to alter her life in any significant way. She has low levels of economic, cultural and social capital, and her options and opportunities have been further reduced when she left school with no qualifications. The break-up of her marriage, the removal of her daughter into care, and the domination by

her mother seem to have had a profound effect on her self-esteem and levels of confidence. She has little money, which further reduces her options; she does not work and it seems unlikely she will. Trudy found learning numeracy a constant struggle and her problems with short-term memory make it unlikely that she would graduate to take a National Test at Level 1 or 2. Overall, her choices appear very limited.

Monica was also born into structures of inequality. In her childhood she felt that the girls in her family were not pushed or bothered with, and were expected to conform to certain subservient roles. In the early part of her marriage, she spoke of it being her duty to have children, to bring up her son, to set him the right example, and try and make her marriage work:

> *When you're being a wife, you're being a wife, it's a duty to a certain extent.*

She also recognised that her working-class background, lack of money and qualifications (lower levels of economic and cultural capital) had limited her options and opportunities, particularly in terms of getting employment which is interesting and well paid. In one way she saw her life as being a series of events that lead a person in a particular direction:

> *The right background, starting a job, getting a career. Its just the events that lead you into it.*

If things had been different she would not be in her current class today.

> *I wish I had the support that I give my son. No, I wouldn't be sitting here. I'd have a better life.*

And yet, despite of all the disadvantages Monica has had in her life, she remained optimistic and there was little hint of either regret or bitterness in her tone. Unlike Trudy, she had more of a network of support from her family and friends. In many ways, she turned the event of her husband leaving her to her own advantage. Although this could

have forced her into a downward spiral it seems to have given her agency to kick-start her into formal education where she was engaged in the process of proving to herself that she has the ability to succeed.

> *In yourself I think you come to the point where you lose yourself or start fighting back and changing.*

And as she pointed out, this was an individual decision, and for her, agency is linked to an individual's own responsibility.

> *It's you who chose to come to here, in some ways nobody forced you.*

Although the changes she made in her life were determined by her social position, they were also agentic in so far as they comprised of activities and practices which she claimed control.

Further discussion and conclusions

This paper tells the story of two white, middle-aged, poor, working-class women who were attending discrete numeracy courses (of a relatively low standard) in two colleges of further education, and it has attempted to do justice to the narratives of people who are under-represented in academic research. Although the paper is concerned with the two learners' experiences of studying numeracy, this is set in the context of their broader identities, constituted in wider structural processes. The case studies do not claim to be typical or representative; they are 'telling' rather than 'typical'; however, they are informative because things that happen in the micro world will often relate to, and help us understand the macro world. They have common patterns from which we can begin to generalise, for example, on how experiences of schooling are connected to later choices and decisions, about learners' motivations for joining numeracy classes, and how learning can shape identities. They also show some of the difficulties facing 'second-chance' learners from deprived, working-class backgrounds. Many of those who return to

education are on a journey of self-discovery, but as well as providing opportunities for liberation and transformation, the pathway may be full of struggles and uncertainties (Burke, 2002).

This paper raises questions about the Labour government's policy of marginalising learners like Trudy and Monica through funding priorities. Indeed, it seems that that policy concerning adult basic skills learning has moved away from original ideas of widening access towards widening participation in higher levels of training which enhance employability, in the belief that the knowledge economy will need greater numbers of highly qualified and skilful workers. Participation on the types of courses described in this paper is becoming increasingly vulnerable for people like Trudy and Monica. This is in spite of the fact that this paper has shown that they can have a profound effect on people's lives in terms of higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, aspirations for future study, and in providing role models for their children.

While learners have agency, and are not simply the passive subjects of external structural forces, some structural factors have the potential to act as constraints and create barriers to learning in the present and in the future. The stories narrated above are part of their conditions of possibility. Because habitus is often seen as deriving from the actors' social background, and in particular their family circumstances, it can be viewed as static and external to the educational setting. However, authors such as Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) emphasise its dynamic quality and argue that it continues to be shaped by the practices of that setting that the actors inhabit. In the case of Monica, her habitus seems to have at least been modified to a certain extent (Barlett and Holland, 2002), and she perceived herself as being more confidence and having greater independence and autonomy. However, although Monica's identity may have been changed by her educational experience at college the question we need to ask is how long is it likely to last? Both learners lack any middle class cultural capital that they could use to access practical support and guidance, and this makes it more unlikely that any changes in identity will be enduring and transferable across different contexts and settings. Although both set out to recreate a learning career it is a fragile path and seems unlikely to be more than a

temporary adventure. Although both learners gained some qualifications they were unlikely to make very much difference to their life chances and outcomes. Even Monica, who gained a Level 1 in numeracy and literacy, was still going to be placed towards the bottom of the educational hierarchy.

It is salutary reminder though that, although successive governments since the Second World War have attempted to improve social mobility, and allow people to succeed on their own merit, it still largely depends on the position that a person is born. Parental social class, and their educational level, still remain the key indicators on the social class and the educational success of their children (Ford and Mansfield, 2005).

6,209 words

Notes

[1] In the *Skills for Life* literature much is made of the National Qualifications Framework in which certain 'levels' are supposedly meant to correspond to standards in compulsory schooling and Higher Education. In this framework Entry Level 3 corresponds to a level expected of an average 11-year-old, and Entry Level 2 is equivalent to standards of the average 7-year-old. I find this comparison insulting and do not wish to be drawn into using it. Adults working at Entry Level have very different experiences and capabilities from young children –many are bringing up, or have brought up, children; others negotiate buying a property, pay mortgages and so on. As Jan Eldred (2006), from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), argues, just because a person has been designated as being an Entry Level learner it does not make them an Entry Level person.

[2] The teachers were known as TRs (teacher-researchers). They provided an important 'insiders' perspective' and took part in data collection, some data analysis and dissemination of the project. They were also very caring and worked with the learners to try and maximise their potential

[3] However, Wolf (2004) argues that there is no causal link between higher qualifications and greater economic productivity and economic gain. In particular, she maintains that there is no evidence that giving people low-level certificates in their 20s and 30s leads to higher economic productivity and wealth.

[4] Trudy did return to study numeracy the next September

Key to transcripts

[text]	Background information;
[…]	extracts edited out of transcript for sake of clarity;
...	pause.

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